



**EXIT  
WOUNDS**

poems

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*For Nina—meri jaan, and as always, our Farrah and Salman*

A tongue-firmly-in-cheek Punjabi recipe for cooking a pot (kuji):

Agg phook basantak mera  
Gheo te atta tera

I bring the labour and breath  
You bring the ingredients

## First Words

As a first-generation immigrant in Canada, my life here was shaped early by the constant “othering” into a series of creative destructions—highwire acts involving several midair pivots—which at every turn threatened to unravel their apparent grace. This process was further complicated by belonging to a minority that has been racialized and communalized, and finally, due to our uncommon subjectivity, marginalized. One outcome of this has been that there is little or no representation of the newcomer’s reality in the dominant social narratives—I have never been made to feel more overly conscious of my skin or with the inflections of my various tongues.

*Exit Wounds* is a debut compilation of fifty poems framed on one very personal narrative—mine and that of my immediate family: we are four individuals who form a “typical” immigrant family. To parse and communicate our experiences, I have modulated the chorus of a billion people in a similar state of flux and amplified a solo: ours. Collectively, we were born in three different countries and have lived and worked on as many continents; we have survived three wars and have been refugees from two adopted homelands. And yet, we are very ordinary in grappling with our multiple dislocations—our pre-occupations having taught us to travel light if we are to discover the truth of our many worlds.

We have now lived willingly in this homeland for over twenty-five years, where, like many others, we are still asked quite often, *but, where are you really, really from?*; or as we may ask each other in our overly familiar idiom: *Boss, where you from?* As Punjabi, our roots here stretch five generations deep. Yet, our nonrepresentation in the federal and provincial policies and social media has ensured that we remain a relatively new community. I believe that this “*monopoly of the ocean of ink*” in which I am but a drop of blood, must be challenged at every instance, and this book is my groping conceit to fill this void.

My poetics are gleaned from the various cultures I have physically inhabited, namely Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, and English. And if there is a central theme percolating through these poems, beyond the intersectionality of Punjab and the Canadian west coast, it is the search for home, both in the spatial and temporal sense. My work re-examines what racial proximities mean for the plurality of minorities engaging with a dominant atheistic monoculture.

I shall also draw creative parallels with the local indigenous realities and mythologies through our shared themes of speaking in borrowed tongues, and the traumas of our stolen cultures and lands. Like them, I am still searching for my lost tribe.

It has been such a long journey from Kotli to antipodally-located Vancouver in the process of a metalsmith’s grandson aspiring to become a wordsmith. Trust me—*there is no single path to crossing a vast chasm in multiple leaps*, yet these leaps of faith will always be original, compelling and universal.

*Decolonize ink!* Stand up and speak these words aloud—poetry must not be read in the dark or silently.

## The Homesick Tribe

The Indian Lohars were gifted metalsmiths who for over 400 years thrived in plying their trade in the northwestern Indian Punjabi village of Kotli Loharan. During the later phase of India's British occupation, the Lohars would emerge from their isolation to face the colonizer's version of the Industrial Age, an age in which local industries were systematically decimated as they offered competition to the British manufacturing back home.

As a result of these policies, within a single generation, the Lohars of Kotli would abandon their workshops and hometown for work overseas and adopt other professions.

The Homesick Tribe is my attempt to capture some of the milieus that the Lohars encountered in venturing out of Kotli.

## The Swimmer of Dunes

*In the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990–1991), several casualties and live land mines were lost to the shifting sands. To this day their exact location and recovery remain elusive.*

Churning between  
 yesterday                      tomorrow  
     an annual glacial inch  
             the growth rate of human nails  
 this restless landmass  
     claws its way towards the continent

As temperatures soar  
 the dune moaning pliant  
     under the breeze  
 is on the move again

In the course of one night's looming  
     several cubic feet of crest  
             collapse  
 spilling forgotten hostilities  
     jumbled down its slopes

Caught in mid-stroke rigor mortis  
     the swimmer of the dunes  
             restless and uncharted  
 dreams at dawn  
     sifting the residue of sand's insomnia

Once for a decade  
     my left foot stood exposed  
             the elements wreaked havoc  
 while a distant ticking  
     inched closer

Why does my right shoulder feel so stiff

This blood tastes of rusting nails

## The City Lights of Sialkot

When it is dark enough  
 our whole family climbs to the rooftop  
 to witness the unaccustomed glow  
     creeping across the southern horizon  
 marking the miracle of electricity  
     inching towards our home  
     to forever blot out our familiar  
         and created stars

Abaji waves at it  
     and says one word  
         *Sialkot*  
 he holds my hand tight  
     whispering  
         *soon soon*

That is the moment  
 ammiji knows that her other child  
     will be a girl  
 and that she will name her  
     *Roshni*  
         *Light*

Somewhere in the distance  
 a steam locomotive sounds its whistle  
     the wave travelling ten miles  
     over unharvested fields  
 before striking our home

## What We Lost During Our Third War

*Somewhere a bell tolls for our years of war: 1965, 1971, and 1990. Of our involvement in the three wars, we were bystanders in the first, spectators to the next, and then participants in the last. Incidentally, only after the last war were those affected offered any form of reparations.*

Here are some of the items we claimed under UN Iraqi Reparations for the Gulf War of 1990.

1. A door frame with 15 years of rising height lines
2. My daughter's second-year shoes
3. 5 favourite Barbies
4. 6 best and battered diecast dinkey cars
5. VHS tape of my son's first step
6. A dozen chipped marbles
7. My wife's favourite Eidh dress—the one she had yet to wear
8. Black & white negatives older than me
9. My original *Dark Side of the Moon* cassette
10. A well-stocked fridge of chilled leftovers from last night's feast
11. One half of a celebration cake—saved for tomorrow's guests
12. Months between September and March 1990–1991
13. That three-star *Shabash!* note of appreciation from a favourite primary school teacher
14. 4.34 years of my estimated remaining lifetime
15. The lost hours of REM sleep
16. All my snatched books no longer there for me to interrogate at midnight
17. Did I list the door frame ... ?
18. (*still counting*)

## Star of the Show



STAR OF THE SHOW IMAGE COURTESY ARFAN AHMED



The frock  
 belonged to a monkey  
 who bit the show master in the crotch  
 and was never seen again

*Bachcha Jamura*  
 now the strongman drawls  
 pointing at the skinny girl  
 perched on a platform  
 the width of her bare feet  
 atop a ten-foot pole  
 balanced solely on his thumb

On cue  
 she gestures at the sky  
 her glass bangles  
 clink  
 the rings on the open palm of the strongman  
 glint  
 his gold tooth gleams  
 as he swiftly hurls the pole several feet vertically  
 deftly alternating its landing  
 onto the index finger  
*ThaaliyaN*  
 he repeats  
 and teases out a reluctant applause

Several times  
 during this street performance  
 the girl will scream  
 the audience will gasp  
 and a mother cradling an infant in her arms  
 will move through the crowd pleading  
*save my girl    save my poor girl*  
*he is going to kill her*  
 a few in the audience will snicker  
 unsure if this too is part of the act  
 so no one will react  
 until the pole is finally lowered  
 and the girl with her heart in her mouth  
 leaps to ground  
 and is rewarded with applause  
 The narrow circle tightens around these hustlers  
 coins are hurled onto a spread sari  
 and as the strongman retrieves the paltry offerings  
 while dusting his battered props  
 the inverted pail begging bowl striped pole

he makes a mental note  
*Pity the monkey*

*This skinny four-year-old  
 with feet barely able to perch  
 is already too heavy for this act*

*She is not the star of my show  
 only Raju the master escape artist  
 with slickly oiled locks  
 tumbling down his shoulders  
 escaping all day from successively tighter  
 rings barrels drums boxes  
 takes that honour daily*

The woman who is not her mother  
 straightens the girl's ruffled frock  
 while the infant in her arms  
 an odd series of such infants  
 squirms  
 even Tommy the pooch  
 balancing all day on a rolling drum  
 descends to earth  
 as this pretend family  
 leaves behind the pageant of the city  
 humming

*Loot leya loot leya  
 aj assi mela loot leya*

*Today we looted the carnival*

Heading for their hovels  
 the infant is returned to the arms of its mother  
 and the performers pass cotton candy salesmen  
 and technicoloured dolls  
 with frilled gaudy dresses  
 and plastic red slippers

the girl stares at the array of bright balloons

Raju the contortionist  
 gets to buy a new comb  
 because he

is